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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000517

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SUBJECT: CAMEROON: POLITICAL MOOD UPDATE

REF: YAOUNDE 330

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: Political tension continues to be high at the top levels of the Cameroon government amidst persistent rumors of an imminent Cabinet shuffle and stepped-up anti-corruption efforts. The President's much-vaunted emergency measures (reftel) have had little impact the economic problems that were at the root of February riots but on National Day he pardoned most of those arrested during the recent civil unrest. The main opposition SDF party marked its eighteenth year; media commentary focused on the party's weak leadership and negligible political importance. While this has been a period of political and economic pause and most Cameroonians are resigned to the unpopular constitutional amendment passed in April, growing frustration with the economy and lack of democracy may fuel further unrest at any time. End summary.

#### Political Tension at the Top

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¶2. (SBU) The political environment continues to be tense and uncertain in the aftermath of February riots, the subsequent heavy security deployment and arrests of alleged participants in the civil unrest, and the April passage of a controversial constitutional amendment. Rumors have swirled for the past few months about an "imminent" Cabinet shuffle, possibly including the removal of the Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni, which has so far not materialized. The rumors were fueled by President Biya's obvious discontent about the economic conditions at the heart of the riots and the way his security forces handled the February events. Also fueling the rumors have been a spate of recent corruption-related arrests (driven to a large extent by political motives), including the former Ministers of Finance and Health, the General Manager of the Cameroon Shipyard, and others, as part of the President's so-called corruption-fighting "Operation Sparrowhawk". Growing press reporting of corruption related to the purchase of a presidential plane, the "Albatross," also has many senior officials worried.

¶3. (SBU) Increased nervousness within the government was evident at the May 20 National Day parade in Yaounde, which was more thinly attended than usual, with unusually heavy security. The President's wife, Chantal Biya, attended the parade for the first time ever, sitting between the President and Prime Minister Inoni, which many interpreted as a sign of a rift between the two men.

¶4. (C) In a recent meeting with Ambassador and other Chiefs of Mission, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Amadou Ali confided that there was "open warfare" in the Cabinet.

#### Some Efforts to Defuse Trouble Below

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¶5. (U) Following the riots, President Biya urged his Cabinet to focus on the economy. He raised government salaries by 15 percent and reduced duties on some food imports in hopes of lowering food prices. Nonetheless, we have yet to see much improvement in the economy. Food prices continue to rise, and the government has talked up agriculture but not put in place any new initiatives. The GRC recently signed two Trade and Development Agency grants worth \$1.5 million to explore new energy project options and has extended the exploration license of the US-led Hydromine bauxite mining project, after major advocacy efforts by the Embassy. In a recent meeting with Ambassador, several top Cameroonian economists highlighted the government's continued lack of economic vision, planning, or willingness to stimulate the economy with fiscal policy.

¶6. (U) In a surprise move, President Biya went beyond his tradition of providing prison amnesties on National Day, to pardon all those in prison for riot-related offenses with sentences less than one year, and reduced longer sentences by two-thirds. According to a senior Ministry of Justice official, this pardon gives the option for those who have appealed their arrests or sentences to drop their appeals and be released. He confirmed media reports that there will be a small lag in implementation due to administrative procedures. Biya's amnesty appears designed to help defuse criticism of the thousands of arrests made following the February unrest.

#### Opposition Also in Pause

¶7. (SBU) While some in the media initially criticized

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parliament's April passage of a constitutional amendment to eliminate presidential term limits, most Cameroonians - including those most vocal in civil society - have moved on. The main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) celebrated its eighteenth year on May 26 with no fanfare. Media editorials commented on the SDF's loss of influence, linked to the weak leadership of its leader John Fru Ndi, who continues to reject calls to step down. Parliament is out of session until June; during the parliamentary hiatus since passing the constitutional amendment there has been very little political activity.

#### Comment

¶8. (C) The political and economic pause has only contributed to a feeling of growing frustration among many Cameroonians. Many contacts and media commentators continue to talk about Cameroon as sitting "on the edge of a volcano". There is a mix of resignation and anger in the air - about food and other prices, about unemployment and poverty, about the lack of democratic space, corruption and the unpopular constitutional amendment which not only eliminated term limits but gave the president immunity from criminal prosecution - all of which could boil over at any moment into renewed social unrest. Biya is increasingly out of touch - a President who never travels within his country and almost never meets with average Cameroonians. In the midst of rising Cabinet tensions and serious economic concerns, Biya's departure from Cameroon on May 28 for a personal European trip, his first time out of the country in seven months (an uncharacteristically long time for him), has reinforced for many his image of being removed from reality.

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